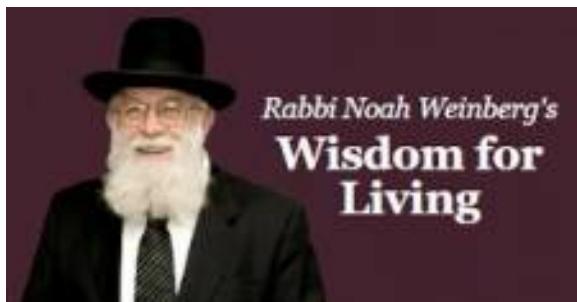


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Element of Surprise

God said to Moshe and Aharon, saying, "When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Provide a wonder for yourselves,' you shall say to Aharon, 'Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh – it will become a snake.'" Moshe came with Aharon to Pharaoh and they did so, as Hashem had commanded; Aharon cast down his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a snake. (*Shemos* 7:8-10)

The epic battle of wills begins. God tells Moshe and Aharon that Pharaoh is going to want to see a wonder, a miracle that verifies that God Almighty Himself in fact sent them. He wants to see something powerful, unique, and compelling. God tells them the game plan – you're going to throw your staff down and it will turn into a snake – and the Torah says that they came to Pharaoh and they "did as God commanded."

When the Torah says that they did as they were commanded, it is a statement of praise – "Look, they listened to God!" But what was so impressive that warrants commanding them? God gives them a miracle to perform – wouldn't anyone do it? What's the big deal? Furthermore, the Torah praises their

coming to Pharaoh. Strangely, it does not command their actual performance of the miracle, which is written *after* this commendation. Isn't that what really deserves to be praised?

And what was the response to this miracle? Moshe and Aharon became the laughingstock of Egypt. Every Egyptian knew this simple parlor trick, even little children. As the Midrash says:

Pharaoh started to laugh at [Moshe and Aharon] and said to them, "This is the sign of your God? Don't you know that all magic is in my domain?" He immediately summoned schoolchildren and they also [threw down their staff, which turned into a snake]. Then he called his wife who also did it... as did the magicians of Egypt and four- and five-year-old boys. (Midrash Rabbah, Va'eira 9:6)

Pharaoh mocks them, saying that their little trick is like bringing coal to Newcastle. Imagine what Moshe and Aharon are thinking. Pharaoh is anxiously waiting to see what this God of the Jews is capable of doing, and this is the big miracle God wants us to perform? Throw the stick and it will become a snake? Imagine if God would tell you that He is sending you to MIT as a messenger of the Creator of the universe to show them that God indeed exists. When the team of professors asks you to perform a miracle to demonstrate God's power, the Almighty instructs you to take out a safety match and strike it. Lo and behold: fire!

Are you prepared to go before the panel of professors and make a fool of yourself? "Safety matches? That's a good one! This guy is certifiably crazy."

In a nutshell, that was the plan Moshe and Aharon had going in to confront Pharaoh. All God told them was to throw down the staff and it will turn into a snake. In their mind, that was the entire plan. They are standing in front of Pharaoh, who has called in everyone to take a look at these two fools.

This is why God praises them for going to Pharaoh: "Moshe came with Aharon to Pharaoh and they did so, as Hashem had commanded." They knew they were entering the lion's den completely unarmed. Yet they did not question the Almighty and did exactly as He requested.

Caught Off Guard

Then God turns the table on Pharaoh and his followers; the entire spectacle was a setup. "And the staff of Aharon swallowed their staffs" (*Shemot* 7:12). After the snakes reverted to staffs, wooden sticks all over the floor, Aharon's staff devoured their staffs. That one was not in the Egyptian repertoire of magic tricks. It was unquestionably a miracle.

"Pharaoh strengthened his heart and he did not heed them, as Hashem had spoken" (*ibid* 7:13). Pharaoh had to strengthen his heart. That means he was scared out of his wits but he overcame his inner fear. The Midrash says he thought that if their staff could swallow up all those sticks, it could just as easily turn on his throne and wipe him out.

God's orchestration was genius. If Moshe and Aharon would have come before Pharaoh and immediately played their hand, casting the staff down and swallowing up their sticks, the impact would have been far less. Pharaoh was waiting to see a miracle; he had steeled himself. He was ready for it and would not have had to harden his heart. He would have been impressed, but not scared.

And who would have heard of the miracle? Only Pharaoh and a few of his ministers would have seen it, and they would have made sure it remained a state secret. The Egyptian populace would never have known about it. What happens instead? Pharaoh calls in everyone – the schoolchildren, the wise men and magicians, his wife. It's on the front-page news! Everyone is in hysterics laughing at Moshe and Aharon.

The element of surprise is a key to an effective military strategy, as ancient Chinese general Sun Tzu writes in *The Art of War*, "Appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak." So while everyone is laughing and their defenses are down, Hashem suddenly sends the entire Egyptian nation a chilling message that shocks them to their core: you are vulnerable, you can be devoured, and you are messing with the miraculous power of the God of the Jews. And Pharaoh and the Egyptians are shaken.

God had an exact plan and wanted to make sure the entire people heard His message. So if you ever find yourself questioning one of Hashem's directives, worried that you are going to look foolish, remember Moshe and Aharon and the staff that turned into a snake. Hashem knows exactly what He is doing. We just need to be patient sometimes in order to see it.



Transcending Time

The meaning that we give a word affects our understanding of it. Meaning infuses mere sounds and symbols with life. In the Hebrew language, slight variations of the same word can change

not only the meaning of that word, but the context of an entire concept. A fascinating example of a Talmudic disagreement over a single Hebrew letter reveals a profound idea.

Most Jews are familiar with the blessing *Hamotzi* that we recite before eating bread. The Talmud relates a debate between Rabbi Nechemyah and his colleagues regarding the appropriate wording of that blessing.⁶⁷ Rabbi Nechemyah believed that the blessing should be "*motzi lechem min ha'aretz*"—who brings forth bread from the earth." His colleagues felt that the blessing should read "**ha**." The only difference is the addition of one Hebrew letter, *hei*. Why should this slight difference in the word matter? It does matter, and it affects our understanding of God's manifestation throughout time.

The source of this disagreement can be found in this week's Torah portion. God commands Moshe to tell the Israelites, "You will know that I am the Lord, your God, the One who brings [*hamotzi*] you out from under the burdens of Egypt." Why does it say "who *brings* you out" when the Israelites were still enslaved? It would seem that the future tense, "who *will* bring you out" would have conveyed a more accurate message.

From this verse, Rabbi Nechemyah understood the word *hamotzi* to imply the future. The Israelites will know that eventually their subjugation to Egypt will end, even while they were presently enslaved. He therefore argues that the blessing over bread should be recited with the word *motzi* (past tense), since the wheat already has been taken out of the earth.

In contrast, the Rabbis, while agreeing that the blessing over bread should reflect the past tense, broaden the scope of the word *hamotzi*, implying its

reference to the past, the present, and the future. This broader understanding emphasizes Divine providence as it transcends time. Rather than being a one-time static action, this understanding recognizes a dynamic process, moving forward throughout time. Past, present, and future are synthesized, forming an ongoing redemptive process, in which God is the sole source.

The significance of this debate becomes far greater than just a disagreement over Hebrew grammar. Its ramifications impact our overall awareness of God's involvement in history and time.

Rabbi Nechemiyah's preference of the word *motzi* was to raise our awareness of God being the first cause of what we're about to eat. The past tense is used to enrich our appreciation of God's involvement in past events.

His colleagues, however, maintained that *hamotzi* is a descriptive phrase, not just a verb. They related to God as the first cause and impetus behind the process of bringing forth wheat from the earth, enabling us to make bread. The blessing *Hamotzi*, recited before eating bread, is meant to enhance our mindfulness of this expansive Divine process. By stressing the first cause of this continual process, grammatical tenses become irrelevant. *Hamotzi* is enlarged to embody the continuum of all time—past, present, and future.

From this expansive perspective, we can gain a greater understanding of the verse "You will know that I am the Lord, your God—the One who brings [*hamotzi*] you out from under the burdens of Egypt." *Hamotzi* is an attribute of God that is ongoing throughout all time. The one God of Israel continually vivifies the act of redemption, of taking us out.

The Hebrew name for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, comes from the word *meitzar*, constriction. Just as God took us out of Egypt, He is constantly creating the redemptive process that can liberate us from that which constricts or enslaves us. Many of us are shackled by negative thoughts, self-destructive behaviors, or even just trying to keep up with the Joneses. Society has become enslaved by drugs, violence, hate, and toxic beliefs.

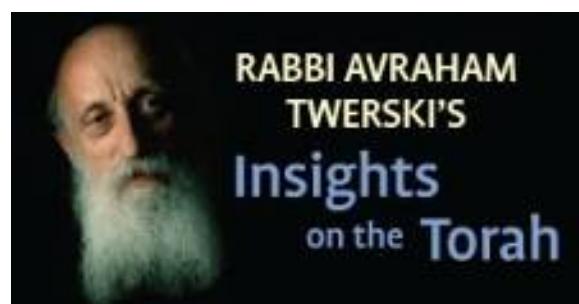
The Passover Haggadah states that "in every generation, one is obligated to see himself as having been taken out of Egypt." Egypt represents a state of physical, mental, and spiritual constriction. A crisis or trauma can threaten to enslave us in despair and subjugate our spirit. On the flip side, we can become

so accustomed to things going our way that we become enslaved and weakened by the status quo.

The Torah expounds on God's constant involvement in the unfolding of history. We, however, are meant to be active partners. Judaism views the journey itself as valuable and life-changing. Life unfolds, and so do we. So much is gleaned from the understanding of a single word.

Making It Relevant

1. Quickly read the following phrase:
GODISNOWHERE
2. Did you see "God is nowhere" or did you see "God is now here"? Recognize how much your entire outlook can be altered by your understanding of a single word, letter, or even space.
3. Be mindful of the meanings that you attach to written and spoken words. Recognize that others might attach different meanings to the same words. Clarify before assuming that you understand them.
4. The next time you eat a sandwich, take a moment to reflect on God's continual involvement in the most mundane aspects of our lives. Make it "food for thought."



Respectful Dialogue

"God spoke to Moses and Aaron and commanded them the Children of Israel and regarding Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to take the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus, 6:13).

This verse appears redundant. Just two verses earlier, the Torah says, "God spoke to Moses, saying, 'Come speak to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, that he send the Children of Israel from his land'" (Exodus 6:10-11). Rashi explains that the second verse means that God told them to speak respectfully to the king of Egypt.

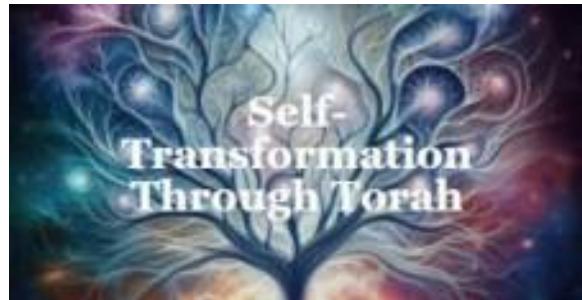
Is this not a bit strange? Moses was going to warn Pharaoh about the ten plagues that he would suffer. In the presence of all the ministers in the palace, Moses was going to speak harshly to Pharaoh. How can this be respectful?

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Chasman says that there was no way out of delivering the warnings to Pharaoh. However, although what had to be said had to be said, it could still be said respectfully rather than with indignation. Indeed, we see that when Moses told Pharaoh about the plague of the firstborn, at which time Moses was angry, he nevertheless said, "Then all these servants of yours will come down to me and bow to me, saying, 'Leave – you and the entire people that follows you'." (Exodus 11:8). Rashi says that Moses really meant that Pharaoh himself will come and bow to him and plead for him to take the Israelites out of Egypt, but out of respect for the king he said "all these servants of yours will come down to me and bow to me"; (Ohr Yahel, 2).

The Torah is teaching us that even when we must reprimand or punish someone, we should make every effort to avoid insulting him. This is so important in disciplining children. Obviously, children must be reprimanded when they do wrong, and sometimes it is necessary to punish them. However, we should be most cautious to do so in a manner that does not humiliate the child or crush him.

Children who were insulted when they were disciplined are likely to develop feelings of shame and worthlessness which may accompany them throughout their lives. If parents would realize how destructive low self-esteem is to their children, they would be much more careful in how they discipline them. Emotional abuse of a child is as serious an offense as physical abuse. Yet, parents who would never think of breaking a child's arm or leg may not give much thought to the words they use in a reprimand.

Children must be taught right from wrong, but they should be helped to retain their dignity.



The Power of a Name

What power can a name hold? Can it shape a destiny, carry a message, or even heal a broken world?

In ancient societies, names weren't just labels - they were prophecies, prayers, and proclamations. This tradition continues in Jewish life today, where parents are considered to receive a flash of divine inspiration when naming their child, as if granted a momentary glimpse into their child's essence and destiny.

So let me present you with a scenario: you just had a baby boy and it's time to give him a name. You run through all the options. Finally, you're ready. You say excitedly to your spouse – "I've got it! Let's name him 'Divorced'!" Your spouse looks at you, stunned. You say "No? Ok, how about 'Grinding Teeth'?" his/her jaw drops. "Not that one either? Ok, fine, but I know you'll love this one – 'Bitter'!" You can imagine where this story ends... couple's therapy. Yet in the Torah, we find something remarkable: these are exactly the names Levi chose for his sons!

Breaking Down the Ivory Tower

In the midst of the epic narrative of plagues and inevitable redemption found in this week's Torah portion, the Torah pauses to list the lineage of Levi: "These are the names of Levi's sons by their lineage: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari" (Shemos 6:16). Gershon means "divorced," Kohath means "grinding teeth," and Merari means "bitter." What could possibly compel a father to burden his children with names that echo such profound pain?

The great Rabbi Ishayah Horowitz (the Shelah HaKadosh) reveals a stunning insight: by naming each son after a different type of suffering, Levi encoded into their DNA - and their entire lineage - an essential awareness of the pain of others.¹

Why would Levi alone, among all the brothers, make such a striking choice? The tribe of Levi was destined

to become the nation's teachers and spiritual guides. After the Golden Calf incident, when the nation fell from its elevated spiritual level, the privilege of Temple service transferred from the firstborn of each family exclusively to the tribe of Levi, who had refrained from participating in the sin. Moses' final blessing to the tribe of Levi confirms this destiny: "They shall teach Your laws to Jacob and Your instructions to Israel" (Devarim 33:9-10).

This elevated status carried a hidden danger. With such distinction came the risk of disconnection - the possibility of becoming trapped in an ivory tower, separated from the struggles of those they were meant to serve. Levi's profound foresight in naming his sons wasn't just symbolic; it was a permanent safeguard against the natural tendency of privileged classes to grow distant from those under their guidance.

Understanding Through Pain

Levi's revolutionary approach to leadership - embedding awareness of human suffering into the very names of his children - offers a powerful model for anyone in a position of influence today. Whether you're a parent, teacher, manager, or community leader, the message remains vital: true leadership begins not with authority but with understanding. It requires us to step out of our towers of privilege and comfort to truly see and feel the struggles of those we serve.

To feel the power of this approach, let's step into the shoes of someone experiencing it firsthand. Imagine being that student in high school - the one who keeps coming late to class, struggles to focus, and can't seem to keep up with the work. Most teachers respond to your behavior with detentions and stern lectures about responsibility. You sink lower in your chair each time, the weight of their disappointment adding to the burden you're already carrying.

But then one teacher takes a different approach. Instead of immediate consequences, they ask you to stay after class. You brace yourself for another lecture, but they simply look at you with genuine concern and ask, "What's really going on?" In that moment of unexpected understanding, everything shifts. The knot in your chest loosens just enough to let the truth slip out - about the family struggles at home, the anxiety that keeps you up at night, the feeling of drowning in expectations you can't seem to meet. That conversation becomes a turning point - not because the teacher solves all your problems, but because for the first time, you feel seen rather than

judged, supported rather than dismissed. Sometimes, the simple act of being understood can change everything.

As Hillel teaches, "Do not judge your fellow man until you have reached his place" (Ethics of Our Fathers 2:4). The next time someone's behavior challenges you, pause. Remember that behind every action lies a story of potential struggle or pain. Take that extra moment to see them through eyes of understanding rather than judgment. Better yet, reach out with genuine concern and ask about their wellbeing. In doing so, you'll be carrying forward the legacy that Levi embedded in his children's names - the art of teaching and leading through understanding.

Shabbat Shalom! Avraham

1. In last week's article on Parshas Shemos, we explored how Moses' leadership emerged from his capacity to deeply feel the suffering of others. This week, we discover how his grandfather Levi deliberately embedded this quality into his family line.